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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001104

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: GOG APOLOGIZES; NON-PARLIAMENTARY
OPPOSITION BLAMES DIPLOMATS

REF: TBILISI 1097

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The June 15 incident at the Dighomi Police Station (reftel) resulting in the detention of 39 protesters caused few initial political ripples. Non-parliamentary leaders addressed about 500-1000 supporters in front of Parliament at roughly 7 pm the same day. Non-parliamentary leaders blamed the United States and other western countries for the violence, citing earlier statements condemning the June 12 violence at Parliament. The crowd was predominately male and over 40 years of age. Non-parliamentary leaders held a diplomatic corps briefing to express their disappointment with diplomats and urged them to make a more "balanced" assessment of events. Non-parliamentary opposition leaders admitted that a number of protesters in the crowd were involved in the incident at Parliament on June 12 and were deliberately taunting the police to arrest them. Police dispersed the crowd with batons and confiscated cameras and video equipment which were later returned. Deputy Minister of Interior Eka Zguladze apologized on live television for the incident and police overreaction and announced that 39 protesters had been detained, most of whom would be processed and released. The Ambassador spoke to Speaker Bakradze to raise concerns surrounding the government's response to the protesters. Bakradze indicated that an investigation has been opened and a number of police officers have been disciplined. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: The immediate, acute political fallout of the events at Dighomi Police station appears minimal as the crackdown did little to stir public emotions. Nonetheless, the police over-reaction was clearly a net negative for the GoG. Despite the apologies, the confiscation of video equipment was unacceptable and the Ambassador conveyed that message to the Speaker of Parliament. At best, the incident can only be described as a poorly-conceived response to a relatively minor provocation. For their part, non-parliamentary opposition leaders seem as confused and rudderless as ever. It was clear to all who attended the diplomatic corps briefing that the non-parliamentary opposition has no plan other than continued protests and possible escalation. We will continue to push all sides toward dialogue although clearly the impasse grew deeper as a result of the events of June 15. End Comment.

What Happened!?

¶3. (C) Piecing together information from various sources including five protest participants from the Republican party, a somewhat coherent picture emerges. At roughly 1:30 pm a group of protesters started organizing near Dighomi Police Station. At roughly 2:15 somewhere between 50-150 (depending on the account) protesters led by David Gamkrelidze (Alliance - New Rights) and Irakli Alasania supporter Zurab Abashidze walked a block or so and stopped in front of the Dighomi police station. According to witnesses,

the group was on the sidewalk opposite the police station and was not blocking traffic. The group started to taunt police officers by calling out their (own) names and addresses, telling the police to arrest them. (Embassy Note: The taunting was confirmed by a number of opposition figures. End Note.) After roughly 10 minutes, a group of police officers approached the crowd from a side street. Depending on the account, some of the protesters stood and engaged the Qon the account, some of the protesters stood and engaged the police while others started to flee. (Embassy Comment: Our view is that most protesters likely started to flee with a smaller number remaining to engage police. End Comment.) Subsequently, a second group of police officers left the front gate of the Police Station and a third came from an adjacent courthouse to encircle the protesters. Police used batons to disperse the crowd. Witnesses said that most protesters fled into surrounding buildings to escape. According to the protesters, the clash lasted about 5-10 minutes. Police checked surrounding buildings for about 30 minutes to arrest protesters who were hiding before returning to the police station.

¶4. (C) MoIA confirmed that 39 protesters were charged with resisting arrest. Television and other cameras were confiscated, but then returned to journalists after the incident. According to at least one journalist, footage had been deleted by GoG authorities. A reporter from Reuters told Post that she had been able to recover some images due to an anti-erase program with which her camera was equipped to prevent precisely this type of scenario. French Ambassador Fournier told the Ambassador that Maestro TV also was able to salvage some footage of the event. A number of journalists were also beaten during the crackdown although

TBILISI 00001104 002 OF 003

none required medical attention. Deputy Minister of Interior Eka Zguladze issued a public apology saying "this is our mistake and we acknowledge it. The Interior Ministry will spare no efforts to avoid repeating the same in the future."

Bakradze Listens to Ambassador's Message

¶5. (C) The Ambassador spoke with Speaker Bakradze to express his concerns about the apparent police over-reaction and the treatment of media representatives. The Ambassador told Bakradze that Post was documenting incidents of violence during protests and expected concrete, transparent responses.

Finally, the Ambassador reiterated A/S Gordon's message that the more progress the GoG makes on democratic reform, the more the USG can support them and that the incident on June 15 was a net negative in that regard. Bakradze said that he understood and would meet with Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili immediately. Bakradze called back and informed the Ambassador that as a result of the incident, four police officers had been suspended pending the outcome of an investigation, one police officer had been downgraded in rank, and four other police officers had been reprimanded.

Bakradze added that doctors had examined patients at the request of the Ombudsman's office and only Abashidze (broken nose) sustained injuries significant enough to require hospitalization.

Non-Parliamentary Opposition Blames the United States, Others

¶6. (C) At a June 15 afternoon rally, David Gamkrelidze called "on the Ambassadors, including Tefft and Fournier to make one more relevant statement. This action by Saakashvili and Merabishvili was incited by their statements." Tina Khidasheli (Republicans - wife of David Usupashvili) said that "diplomats are to blame for their irresponsible statements." Levan Gachechiladze said that diplomats needed to "refrain from making provocative statements." Eka Beselia (United Georgia) called the USG statement a "propaganda tool used by Saakashvili" and only an Embassy Statement. Koba Davitashvili (Party of the People) followed by saying that these Ambassadors "have been appointed by previous

administrations. We'll see what will change."

Non-parliamentary Opposition Briefs Diplomatic Corps

¶7. (C) Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement - United Georgia), David Usupashvili (Alliance - Republicans), Victor Dolidze (Alliance), Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), Beselia, and Gamkrelidze addressed the diplomatic corps after their rally at Parliament the evening of June 15. The group focused on the events of June 15 demanding statements condemning the GoG and the immediate release of the young people involved. Burjanadze, Gamkrelidze, and Zourabichvili condemned the statements that gave Saakashvili "carte blanche" to crack down on the protesters. The group repeated a long litany of grievances. The non-parliamentary opposition blamed the GoG for the June 12 incidents outside of Parliament for "failing to alert" them of their exact plans. Gamkrelidze called for an investigation, and speculated that although an egg or two had been thrown by protesters, it was likely that GoG plants in the crowd started throwing rocks to discredit the protesters. The group repeatedly claimed that the GoG had never made any attempt at dialogue; therefore, demands for dialogue should be directed at the GoG. (Embassy Comment: Usupashvili who negotiated with Bakradze at the Ambassador's residence remained silent. Alasania ally Dolidze joined the chorus denouncing Bakradze, Saakashvili and others for refusing to engage in dialogue despite Alasania's previous talks with Bakradze. End Comment.)

Dip Corps Has Had Enough

¶8. (C) After Burjanadze began another tirade blaming diplomats for the violence on June 15, the Dutch Ambassador interjected and called her remarks inappropriate. Burjanadze interrupted him repeatedly until Usupashvili intervened and explained that they did not blame the Ambassadors per se but were only expressing their opinion as to how Saakashvili interpreted the comments. The group suggested that the Ambassadors exercise more caution when issuing statements. After another round of thinly veiled recriminations alleging that the Ambassadors were unduly biased toward the GoG and do not understand what is happening in Georgia, French Ambassador Fournier interjected saying "we are not stupid, do not treat us like we are." Fournier then outlined the work he and other Ambassadors had done promoting democracy and specific opposition causes. Fournier continued that the non-parliamentary leaders subjective critiques of the Ambassador's job performances were misplaced. The French

TBILISI 00001104 003 OF 003

Ambassador reiterated that the Ambassadors answer to their capitals, not the non-parliamentary opposition. He then pointed out a number of inconsistencies in the non-parliamentary opposition's requests, on one hand telling the diplomatic corp not to intervene in internal affairs, then calling on the diplomatic corps to issue statements about the domestic political scene.

TEFFT